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Billions of federal dollars tagged for mass transit projects in the Chicago region have been lying untouched because the state can't come up with the required matching funds. If that doesn't happen soon, two congressmen warned this week, the feds are going to give that money to someone else.

U.S. Reps. Mark Kirk, a Republican from Highland Park, and Melissa Bean, a Democrat from Barrington, are most concerned about the \$1.5 billion in New Start money for Metra suburban rail projects: the suburb-to-suburb STAR line, SouthEast Service to South Cook and Will Counties and expansion of the Union Pacific lines into McHenry and DuPage Counties.

The Chicago Transit Authority and Pace bus system also have New Start projects. In all, about \$4.8 billion in federal money could be in jeopardy.

The Federal Transit Administration has frozen those projects for 30 to 45 days, "waiting to see a reliable source of local funding," a spokesman said.

Join the club. We've been waiting for more than a year for the General Assembly to address the transit mess. Things seemed headed in the right direction, with a strong bill that included management reforms, a reasonable long-term funding solution and some significant money-saving concessions from the CTA unions.

But lawmakers have blown deadline after deadline, and they don't appear worried that the union offer will evaporate Dec. 31, or that the transit agencies will have to raise fares and cut services on Jan. 20.

Those measures have been delayed twice as Gov. Rod Blagojevich magically came up with more money -- first a \$91 million advance on next year's revenue, then a \$27 million "grant" transferred from a state capital fund. But a rabbit pulled from a hat probably doesn't fit the FTA's

definition of "a reliable source of local funding." Nor would the annual lump-sum bailout that lawmakers have grudgingly passed in each of the last several years. No, it's going to take a real fix. But the bill that would do that has become tangled up in other agendas -- everything from Downstate highways to new casinos to minority set-asides, all being debated in a climate of mistrust and animosity.

It's only a matter of time before other states and their lobbyists eye that idle pile of New Start money and argue that they could put it to use right now. "The bottom line is this: California, Florida and Texas do not suffer from this kind of political gridlock," Kirk said. There's a very real possibility that Illinois could lose that money to a state that has its act together.